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AUTHOR Goldring, Ellen B.; Hallinger, Philip
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the influence of differences in school district organization on internal school organizational processes that are central to reform strategies, such as teacher cooperation and instructional leadership. Data were obtained from interviews conducted with the principals of 98 Tennessee elementary schools that participated in the State's School Incentive Improvement Program (SIIP) and from teacher questionnaires. Findings indicate that schools in both centralized and decentralized districts had a more positive school ethos when compared to schools in districts characterized by "fragmented centralization." The level of district support appeared to be a crucial mechanism for positive change in schools. A conclusion is that the implementation of internal organizational processes may depend upon designating a clear message of general district control policy and the level of district support for school operation. (37 references) (LMI)

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District Control Contexts and School Organizational Processes

Ellen B. Goldring

and

Philip Hallinger

Department of Educational Leadership

Peabody College-Box 514

Vanderbilt University

Nashville, TN 37203

(615) 322-8000

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District Control Contexts and School Organizational Processes

Ellen B. Goldring
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Philip Hallinger

During the 1980s, the proliferation of the effective schools literature led policymakers to focus school improvement efforts on individual schools. These research findings contributed substantially to our understanding of classroom and school effectiveness. However, district leaders were still faced with considerable ambiguity concerning how to implement this research for the benefit of school systems.

In the absence of clear information, superintendents proceeded to draw on the available knowledge-base to develop district improvement strategies. Although these district-oriented reforms have generally attempted to alter the nature of the relationships between different levels of the educational hierarchy, the nature of these district-led efforts has varied widely across the country (Purkey & Smith, 1985). In the absence of substantial empirical research, the notion of strategic change at the district level remains the subject of considerable practical and theoretical debate (e.g., see Cuban, 1984; Hallinger & Edwards, 1992; Musella & Leithwood, 1990; Tyack, 1990).

District improvement programs grounded in the effective schools movement, for example, have tended to adopt (often implicitly) a top-down orientation to change. Although the school remains the unit of focus in these efforts, the district office assumes functional responsibility for ensuring that schools develop the desired "profile" of an effective school. This suggests a highly proactive role for the central office, with a focus on setting clear school goals, clarifying curricular and instructional processes, providing staff development training, and monitoring student outcomes (Murphy, Hallinger & Mesa,

1984; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). This approach to district organization has been critiqued on several grounds, especially on the assumptions it makes about the role of school professionals in the change process (Cuban, 1984).

In contrast, a number of recent district-initiated efforts based in the restructuring literature have started with a different set of assumptions about school-based improvement (Barth, 1986; Carnoy & MacDonnell, 1989; Hallinger & Edwards, 1992). Here, the school becomes the primary locus of educational decision-making rather than the central office (Barth, 1991; Guthrie, 1986). The central office role is viewed primarily in terms of agenda-setting and support. A service orientation predominates rather than a monitoring and controlling focus (Cuban, 1990; David, 1990; Tyack, 1990).

Implicit in this discussion is the notion that schools are embedded in a larger district organization and that each district creates its own context of control and coordination by which to manage and support individual schools (Peterson, 1984; Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1987). Although we hypothesize that these district context factors influence the actions of constituent schools, the nature of the impact of district coordination strategies on school organizational processes has yet to be specified. Purkey and Smith (1985) emphasized the urgent need for better information on district-level policy reforms when they asked:

> What is an appropriate mechanism for promoting across-the-board improvement that remains sensitive to often profound differences among schools? How can teachers and school administrators be invested with a feeling of ownership and commitment to mandates that originate outside of the school? Who will participate. . . in decision-making concerning the content and form of school reforms?

The varying assumptions that underlie different district improvement strategies bring to the forefront cardinal questions regarding the relationship that exists between the larger school district organization, particularly the central office administration, and individual schools. Important questions concern the nature of the relationship between characteristics of school districts and a) the productivity of individual schools, and b) the capacity of individual schools to engage in successful improvement efforts. Do differences in the organization of school districts influence the orientation and improvement processes observed in schools? The objectives of this paper are:

1) to study whether the configuration of district control and coordination mechanisms, termed district control contexts, influences the internal organizational processes of individual schools,
2) to examine the direction of this impact, and
3) to examine whether level of district support is a mediating factor which may help explain the nature of the impact of district contexts on individual schools.

Superintendents are struggling with the question of whether to grant greater autonomy to schools. Moreover, they are unsure about which specific aspects of district operations should be centralized and which should be decentralized. Currently, the empirical literature in educational administration that might provide guidance to school policymakers is sparse. This study seeks to add to our understanding of how the district context influences the internal school processes that lead to educational improvement.

Perspectives

The effective schools movement has guided practitioners and researchers alike to view the school as the focal point for change and improvement. Explicitly stated in the message

of the effective schools studies was the dual notion that "schools make a difference" and that educators must, therefore, take responsibility for their students' learning. This orientation led many reform advocates to focus attention solely on reshaping the internal operations of schools to conform with the image of instructionally effective schools presented in the literature. As Cuban (1984) noted, during the early stages of the school effectiveness movement, there was almost exclusive focus on the local school site and the principal's leadership.

> [This] implicitly ignores the pivotal role that school boards and superintendents play in mobilizing limited resources, giving legitimacy to a reform effort, and the crucial interplay between central office and school site that can spell the difference between implementation success and failure (p. 131).

Or, as Musella and Leithwood (1990) observed, "There is a danger in the [effective schools] movement. . . It is the danger of being seduced into acting as though the school somehow exists as a closed system" (p. 90).

Conceptual models of school effectiveness have taken heed of the above warnings and increasingly include external, antecedent variables when predicting school or principal effectiveness (Andrews, Soder & Jacoby, 1986; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1990; Heck, 1990; Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1985). Such models represent more sophisticated ways of operationalizing the educational production function. Organizational theory also widely supports the impact of the external environment on internal organizational functions (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

The operationalization and empirical verification of the relationship between the

school district context and internal school-site processes are, however, complex (Crowson, 1990; Peterson, 1984; Purkey & Smith, 1985). Perhaps one explanation for the difficulty in comprehending district-school relationships is the notion that organizational systems within school districts are loosely coupled. Researchers have found that the linkages which tie the functions of the central office administration to those of schools are surprisingly weak.

For example, Hannaway and Sproull (1978-79) studied the relationship between the managerial systems of central administration in school districts and parallel processes in schools. They concluded that, "the activities of management seem to be only marginally related to the production activities of schools" (p. 4). In another study of California school districts, Davis and Stackhouse (1977) came to a similar conclusion. They found that:

> As far as teacher evaluation is concerned, the formal structure of the schools we visited appeared to be isomorphic with the relevant environmental myths. Schools do try to buffer teacher from the impact of the formal [evaluation] system, using the rationale that teaching is a complex and active task. Yet they carefully maintain the appearance of compliance with [state and district] evaluation regulations. (p. 13)

These and other studies have led many observers to conclude that the curricular and instructional functions of school districts and schools are loosely coupled. At the same time, the loose coupling metaphor does not imply that all functions within the educational system are attenuated as one moves across levels. Indeed, as March (1978) and others have noted, even in educational organizations characterized by loosely coupled technical processes, other operational domains such as transportation and resource allocation are

often highly centralized and tightly coupled.

The existence of loosely and tightly coupled systems within the same organization has led researchers to refer to educational organizations as "organized anarchies" or as exhibiting a form of "fragmented centralization" (March, 1978; Tyack, 1990). These characterizations highlight the non-rational features of school organizations: the degree to which school systems depart from bureaucratic models of organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Yet, if the traditional mechanisms of coordination and control believed to bind people and processes in organizations are often weak in school districts, how is coordination achieved?

In studies that complement this aforementioned literature on district organization, researchers have found that rational-bureaucratic management processes (e.g., goals, supervision, defined curricula) do not comprise the only set of coordinating mechanisms at work in schools (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Cuban, 1984; Leithwood & Fullan, 1984). It appears that school districts are able to influence school-level processes through *cultural* processes as well (Bolman & Deal, 1991; Fullan, 1991). Schools may be influenced by their district contexts through symbols, rituals and common meanings as well as through structural influences such as goals, supervision, and assessment programs (Firestone & Wilson, 1986; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990).

Over time, traditions and rituals -- accepted ways of accomplishing the work of the organization -- as well as shared values evolve to create an ethos or culture in school districts. This cultural context acts as a mechanism of control over the behavior of individuals and their work units (e.g., schools). This occurs as cultural norms begin to define, in a broad sense, the range of socially acceptable viewpoints and behavior (Baldridge & Deal, 1983; Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Hargreaves, 1991). It should be

emphasized here that cultural norms do not always (or even usually) develop in an intentional fashion. Moreover, they often operate beneath the surface of professional relations, and may or may not be consistent with the organization's formal control structure as encompassed in goals, policies, and regulations.

It should also be noted that rational-bureaucratic and cultural perspectives on organizations are not mutually exclusive (Firestone & Wilson, 1986; Peterson et al., 1987). The notion of mixed control structures is supported by Coleman and LaRocque's (1990) recent study of Canadian school districts. In their research, they found that the internal processes of schools were influenced by the ethos of the school district in which they were located. Features of district organization were associated with patterns of practice in schools. Specifically, the study found that districts influenced constituent schools through the development of several foci that created a context for school operations: accountability focus, learning focus, change focus, commitment focus, caring focus, community focus (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990).

In an earlier study of "effective school districts" Peterson and his colleagues (1987) came to a similar conclusion.

> Superintendents in this study report using a variety of approaches to coordinate curriculum and instruction and to control the work of principals and teachers. . . It may well be that this combination of coordinating, controlling and assessing behaviors and structures affected both technical efficiency and cultural linkages to increase student achievement in the district, an argument made by Firestone and Wilson (1986) regarding the work of effective principals. (p.

90)

In summary, this body of research has pointed to the view that bureaucratic linkages may, "act both as technical structuring elements and as cultural signals and symbols to organization members" (Peterson et al., 1987, p. 93). This suggests that attempts to understand the nature and effects of the district office on school-level processes should incorporate both rational and cultural perspectives on school organization. Furthermore, it provides a rationale for examining the organizational culture as a mechanism of soial and professional control.

This paper examines district contexts which may promote or impede the development of certain internal school organizational processes that are central to reform strategies, such as teacher cooperation and instructional leadership. Furthermore, we explore whether district-school linkages are mediated by the level of district support of individual schools. In addition we examine the extent to which the district context and its linkages to individual schools can be interpreted in terms of structural and/or cultural/symbolic paradigms.

Methodology

This paper reports on the secondary analysis of data collected from 98 elementary schools in Tennessee which participated in the state's School Incentives Improvement Program (SIIP). SIIP was a four year study (1983-86) designed to assess the impact of school-level, financial incentives on student achievement. While the project successfully implemented a true experimental design during its third year, the current study is not concerned with the manipulated variable.

Recruitment of Subjects

Schools were recruited for voluntary participation in the program during the spring and summer of 1982. In the spring of 1982, the Commissioner of Education held meetings across the state with superintendents of all Tennessee school systems in which he explained the purpose of the project. Afterwards, the Commissioner sent a letter to all of the superintendents in which he outlined guidelines for participation in the project.

Thirty-six of the 147 school superintendents in the state returned participation request forms. These 36 systems represented a potential pool of 270 elementary schools. Calls and visits were made by SIIP staff to all of the superintendents who had responded positively to the initial inquiry from the Commissioner. Following these contacts, 28 superintendents representing 133 schools indicated a continued interest in participation.

Criteria for participation in the project included: location, size, and type of school system. Given the statewide nature of the project it was important to include, to the greatest extent possible, systems that represented Tennessee schools as a whole. Grade structure and testing patterns were also of primary importance. Schools with the most extensive testing programs, which also included grades 1-6 or 1-8, were identified as first choice participants. Because they did not include schools that had the 1-6 or 1-8 grade configuration, five of the remaining twenty-eight systems were dropped from consideration. A total of 110 schools in the 23 systems that remained met general project criteria. Of these, 98 ultimately agreed to participate in the project. However, eleven schools withdrew from project participation before the project's third year. Thus 87 schools in 19 school systems remained in the SIIP project throughout the period of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from principals and teachers. Principals of all participating schools

completed a structured interview which asked them questions pertaining to their district context. Specifically principals responded to questions regarding system programs, system support for school improvement efforts, staff development and evaluation activities, and school programs. Teachers and principals also completed extensive questionnaires which assessed the extent to which various organizational processes associated with effective schools were evident in their particular schools.

The first stage of this analysis for this study was to delineate district control contexts. District control contexts were analyzed using information obtained from the principal interviews. District control contexts are defined in this analysis according to the following variables:

1. uniformity in the use of curriculum and instructional models (i.e., mandated use of particular math and/or reading curricula through the district at the elementary level);
2. formalization of district procedures through rules and regulations (i.e., presence and degree of influence of district rules reported by principals);
3. determination of how a school's allocation of staff development days (five days) would be used (i.e., determined by the central administration or by the school);
4. system requirements for written goals at the school level (i.e., whether the central office required principals to have a set of written goals for the school);
5. locus of initiation of staff development activities for teachers and principals (i.e., whether ongoing professional development is initiated by the school or central office).

Cluster analysis was used to group districts into control contexts according to their responses on the above variables.

In the second stage of this project, we examined whether differences in the control contexts of districts was associated with patterns of variation in the internal organizational processes of individual schools. The present inquiry employs measures of school ethos from the teacher questionnaires as indicators of the internal school organizational processes. These constructs were chosen as they have been documented to be highly correlated to school effectiveness.

Specifically, six constructs, measured on a five-point Likert scale, are presented in the present analysis: 1) *Instructional Leadership*, an 18 item subscale (alpha=. 96), addresses teachers' perceptions of the degree to which principals actively facilitate achievement-related behaviors in the school; 2)*Teacher Rapport*, a 14 item subscale (alpha=.94), addresses teachers' perceived sense of professionalism; 3) *Teacher Peer Commitment*, a seven item subscale (alpha=.81), addresses teachers' perceptions of the degree of mutual support and collegiality within the school; 4) *Sense of Mission*, a 10 item subscale (alpha=.94), addresses teachers' perceptions about the clarity of an academic mission in the school; 5) *Monitoring Student Progress*, a 9 item subscale (alpha=.80), addresses teachers' perceptions of the degree to which student performance is systematically assessed, and feedback is used to plan instruction and design improvement; and 6) *Sense of Competency*, a 5 item subscale (alpha=.88), addresses teachers' perceptions about the level of competence among teacher peers. Teacher reports on the six subscales were aggregated at the school level. Analysis of variance was used to test for differences on these six variables for schools in differing district contexts.

Thirdly, the level of district support provided for the individual schools that comprise the district was measured. It is hypothesized that the level of support that districts provide for schools is crucial in understanding the nature of the relationship between district

context and internal school processes. Information regarding district-level of support was gathered from the principal interviews. Principals reported whether or not the district provided support in four pivotal areas: continuous staff development, school assessment programs, help for new teachers, help for new principals.

Results

In this section of the paper, we present the results of our analysis of this district data. First, we describe the districts in terms of the control context they represent for schools. Next, we examine the impact of district contexts on the technical processes of constituent schools. Finally, we explore whether other facets of the district organization, defined as technical support mechanisms, contribute to our understanding of the district's impact on school operations.

District Control Contexts

A preliminary step in the research was to define the district control contexts represented in this data set. The results of the analysis indicate that 14 of the 19 Tennessee school districts clustered into three groups, each characterized by a distinct control contexts. It is interesting to note that these empirically derived clusters correspond to conceptual descriptions of district organizations as described in the literature. We defined these school district contexts as centralized, fragmented centralization, and decentralized (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 About Here

Centralized district control contexts. The first cluster is comprised of districts that employ highly centralized control strategies. The pattern of responses for these districts

tended towards centralization on every dimension of organizational control included in the study. The central administration is most likely to have defined a system-wide curriculum in math and reading and to have adopted a preferred instructional model. In these school systems, district administrators require principals to develop written goals for their schools, and rules and regulations are emphasized as major determinants for school-level administration. The district office assumes primary responsibility for initiating staff development for both teachers and principals, as well as for determining how staff development days are used by schools.

This pattern of highly centralized district control indicates a higher level of central office input into school-level decisions than has been suggested in the general literature. The portrait is one of systematic management of the district's educational programs, rather than of loosely coupled systems. It is interesting to note that these centralized school districts tended to serve lower-SES students populations than the other two clusters of districts in our sample.

Decentralized district control contexts. The second cluster of districts is characterized by a pattern of highly decentralized control over schools. Authority for important decisions concerned with curriculum and instruction is more likely to be located in the schools than in the central office. In comparison with the centralized districts, these school districts exhibit fewer centrally mandated processes and systems. Goals, curricula, instructional models and staff development programs are controlled at the school level. District rules and regulations appear to be less influential in ongoing school-site administration.

This decentralized cluster is the largest group of districts in the sample. On the average, these districts also serve higher status students and are the largest districts in terms of student population.

The general pattern of district control appears to conform with the precepts of school-based decisionmaking. Alternatively, the same pattern of control mechanisms could be interpreted as predictors of loose coupling. We return to this issue later in our analysis.

Fragmented centralization of control. The third type of districts are those whose pattern of control might be characterized as a form of "fragmented centralization" (Tyack, 1990). This cluster exhibits centralized control on some indicators and considerable autonomy on others. For example, these districts tend to employ a system-wide curriculum in some areas, but not in others (i.e., in math or in reading). There are few rules and regulations, and the district administration does not expect schools to develop written goals for central inspection. The district initiates staff development for teachers but not for principals. The schools determine the use of allocated staff development days. Thus, these districts exhibit some formal control features, but not others.

These school systems tend to serve middle class students. In addition, the districts that we have characterized as falling within the rubric of "fragmented centralization" are generally small compared to the other districts in the sample.

Patterns of District Support for School Improvement

After dividing the schools into these three groups, we reviewed the level and nature of district support provided for schools in each type of control context. District support was assessed through four indicators obtained through the principals' perceptions. The indicators include support for continuous staff development, school assessment programs, help for new principals, and help for new teachers. The results of this analysis, as presented in Table 2, indicate a clear pattern across the four areas of district support measured in the study.

Insert Table 2 about Here

Schools in both centralized and decentralized districts receive considerably more support from their districts than do schools in districts with a fragmented centralization pattern of control. For instance, 84% of the principals in centralized districts, and 82% of the principals in decentralized districts indicate that they receive district support for continuous staff development. This assessment compares with only 18% of the principals in the fragmented centralization districts who perceived such support as available. As mentioned above, this pattern is consistent for all four areas of support reported.

Impact of District Ethos on Schools as Contexts for Change

Thus, far our analyses have focused solely on the nature of district-level processes. As noted earlier, there remains considerable disagreement on the nature and effects of district organization. The sociological analysis of districts as loosely coupled systems and the more recent district effectiveness literature lead to different conclusions about the nature of district organization. Moreover, they suggest the different conclusions concerning the potential impact of the district ethos on schools as contexts for improvement.

The next set of analyses explores how the different patterns of district organization identified in this study influence the internal functioning of schools. As described earlier, the outcome measures for this analysis are six variables commonly identified as factors that reflect an individual school's ability to initiate and sustain curricular and instructional changes: instructional leadership, teacher rapport, peer commitment, school mission, teacher competency, monitoring of student progress. Our interest here is in determining how the district's ethos influences the capacity of schools to create conditions for improvement.

Analyses of variance, presented in Table 3, tested for differences among schools in the three district contexts on the selected internal school process variables. The analyses indicate significant differences on all of the six indicators of internal school organizational processes. In addition, the direction of the differences is identical for all of the six indicators. A curvilinear relationship emerges. Teachers in decentralized and centralized control districts report more positive internal organizational processes (i.e., high amounts of instructional leadership, good teacher rapport, high sense of peer commitment, clear school missions, a high sense of teacher competency and a large amount of monitoring of student progress) than do teachers in districts with a "fragmented centralized" context. The internal school ethos of schools in centralized and decentralized districts are quite similar and appear equally positive in terms of their potential for supporting school change and improvement.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Returning to the original questions behind this study, the result sindicate that district contexts *do* seem to have an impact on the internal organization of schools. The analyses of variance suggest that schools in both centralized and decentralized districts have more positive school ethos when compared with schools in district characterized by "fragmented centralization." Furthermore, the level of district support appears to be a crucial mechanism used by central office administrators to influence school-site processes in both centralized and decentralized districts.

The results of this analysis call into question the claim that centralized or decentralized improvement strategies are inherently better at stimulating the development of school

contexts that can support educational change. Together, the findings suggest that what may be most important when developing positive internal organizational processes in schools is whether the school site receives a clear message about the general policy of control in the district and the level of district support for school functioning.

Conclusion

Both the research and professional literatures seem to suggest a strong dichotomy between district strategies emphasizing high control (i.e., tight coupling with high levels of district input) and the opposite (i.e., school based management). The data in this study seem to suggest that both strategies may have the potential to lead to similar, positive outcomes. In this sample of Tennessee school districts, both centralized and decentralized districts have apparently been able to obtain equally positive internal organizational process which have been documented to impact school effectiveness. The important issue may be one of signaling to schools, not one of control.

Another finding of this study is that level of district support seems to be crucial if districts want to have a positive impact on schools. Decentralization may be especially effective when there is proper support for local school programs. Hence, the impact of district control contexts on individual schools may be mediated by other factors, such as level of district support. This would support the findings of Coleman and LaRocque (1990) and of Murphy and Hallinger (1986).

It seems that there is more than one path which can be taken by school superintendents districts to influence the processes that enable schools to bring about lasting change. What appears to be necessary, according to the results of this initial study, is levels of support and clear messages, not necessarily clear goals. The study of the impact of districts on schools

requires a high level of complexity. This research helps suggest a line of inquiry for rethinking about the relationships between the central district and the school site.

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TABLE 1:
Definition of District Control Contexts

DISTRICT CONTROL CONTEXTS

	Centralized (19 Schools in 3 Districts)	Fragmented Centralization (11 Schools in 3 Districts)	Decentralized (39 Schools in 8 Districts)
System-wide Reading Curriculum	+	−	−
System-wide Math Curriculum	+	+	−
Schools Must Develop Formal Written Goals for Control	+	−	−
Formal Rules & Regulations of Procedures	+	+	−
District Determines Extra Staff Development Days	+	−	−
District Initiates Teacher Staff Development	+	+	−
District Initiates Principal Staff Development	+	−	−

TABLE 2:
Levels of District Supports According to Three District Control Contexts — Percent of Principals Indicating That the District Provides Various Supports

DISTRICT CONTEXTS

District Provides Support For:		Centralized (N=19)	Fragmented Centralization (N=11)	Decentralized (N=39)
Continuous Staff Development	(%)	84	18	82
	(N)	16	2	32
School Assessment Programs	(%)	61	36	51
	(N)	11	4	20
Helping New Principals	(%)	16	8	26
	(N)	3	1	10
Helping New Teachers	(%)	72	27	56
	(N)	13	3	22

TABLE 3:
School Ethos in Three District Contexts
Means, Standard Deviations, and F-Test of One-Way ANOVA*

DISTRICT CONTEXT

School Ethos		Centralized (N=19)	Fragmented Centralization (N=11)	Decentralized (N=39)	F
Teacher Rapport	$\bar{X}$	4.04	3.85	4.16	3.92**
	S.D.	.40	.41	.29	
Teacher Peer Commitment	$\bar{X}$	3.89	3.74	3.97	2.44
	S.D.	.35	.44	.16	
Clear Mission	$\bar{X}$	3.98	3.29	3.98	19.24***
	S.D.	.21	.67	.27	
Instructional Leadership	$\bar{X}$	3.50	3.22	3.60	3.23**
	S.D.	.41	.58	.38	
Teaching Monitoring Student Progress	$\bar{X}$	3.64	3.41	3.74	8.13***
	S.D.	.24	.29	.20	
Teacher Sense of Competency	$\bar{X}$	3.99	3.90	4.12	4.11**
	S.D.	.28	.28	.19	

*Based on Teacher's Reports
**$p < .05$
***$p < .01$